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This brief paper will continue the heated debate that has taken place in Australia, (and in a CRUX event at Queensland University of Technology, November 2006), about what sort of education is best for our children, and who should choose and prepare the curriculum. The Federal Education Minister is pushing for a centralized curriculum with students in all states sharing a similar school learning experience. In this paper, I shall propose a diversity of Educational experiences for Australia's children within a secular framework to ensure that fervent fundamentalist religious propaganda does not ease out the evidence based scientific method. My argument will be presented as a metaphor from nature. In this paper, I shall compare the education of children to the tending of many flourishing gardens by caring, experienced and knowledgeable gardeners and the production of a variety of optimally healthy plants

LET THEM BLOOM: GROWING COLOURFUL CITIZENS+

Dr. Elizabeth Tindle, FAPS

“Consider the lilies of the field; they toil not, neither do they spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these” Bible, Matthew, 6; 25

This brief paper will continue the heated debate that has taken place in Australia, (and in a CRUX event at Queensland University of Technology, November 2006), about what sort of education is best for our children, and who should choose and prepare the curriculum. The Federal Education Minister is pushing for a centralized curriculum with students in all states sharing a similar school learning experience. In this paper, I shall propose a diversity of Educational experiences for Australia’s children within a secular framework to ensure that fervent fundamentalist religious propaganda does not ease out the evidence based scientific method. My argument will be presented as a metaphor from nature. In this paper, I shall compare the education of children to the tending of many flourishing gardens by caring, experienced and knowledgeable gardeners and the production of a variety of optimally healthy plants

Would we like a country of tall poppies? Poppies in Australia invariably end up with their heads chopped off, figuratively speaking. Australia has a penchant for cutting down tall poppies. May be it is due to our belief in an egalitarian society! In any case, all one colour (usually red and representing Remembrance Day) one size, little variation in height – how boring! Monoculture stagnates and destroys nature’s fecund abundance. When it comes to growing people, I would argue for the equivalent of an herbaceous border of colourful citizens with their “infinite variety” (Shakespeare’s Anthony and Cleopatra). Australian author and gardener of the 1940s, Edna Wallis, presented a template of good Australian gardens. She suggested a mixture of annuals, perennials, and biannuals of every hue, shape and size. Some of the most attractive native plants require little human input, merely space to develop and be appreciated in nature’s garden. To take this analogy further, we know that Australian people can be represented by the tall, elegant lupins, the exotic banksia or protea as well as the tiny colourful pansies and violets. In between are gerberas and geranium equivalents. In our population we need a wild child or two, the inevitable Mulga Bill of Banjo Paterson fame, or the popular acacia, grevillea or sturt desert pea. Even the much maligned Salvation Jane has a place in the Australian sun and so have tough red cannas and straight-as-a-die, agapanthus. We could go on and on, ad infinitum listing the diversity of Australians, the variety of native species as well as the introduced, African, Asian, American and European species we see growing in many gardens, like the incredible variety of Australians from hundreds of nations.

Education has the ability to cultivate a rich human equivalent to the garden described. Education includes in the herbaceous border of flowers, an herb garden of rosemary, wild thyme, dill, native mint and the rest. They represent people with piquancy- essential oils or salt of the earth types. Some are the “Aussie Battlers” of the outback. Australian

education needs to foster colourful, eccentric people and those with idiosyncrasies. A “Coca cola” education, universal, global and monotonous is second best and is to be rejected. We do not want to cultivate a garden of roses all tarred with the same brush, uniform, in rows, looking the same, having had the same education and having learned the same topics at school. I think back to the shock when first finding out that just about everyone in SA in the sixties, had to read “I can jump Puddles” by Alan Marshall and other books with which I was unfamiliar. As a young teacher, I wondered why? I would propose that the country does not want a field of one dominant flower or weed (even if the latter be beautiful, purple lantana), because of education having lacked the flair of an inspirational gardener. An inspirational gardener! “Aye, there’s the rub” (Hamlet Act 3, Scene 1). It is the gardener or classroom teacher who has the “green fingers” and who can perform transformations in education.

To ensure and encourage the rapid and healthy growth and development of our human herbaceous border, we need a suitable rich soil with the most appropriate environmental inputs. Some living creatures will thrive in the poorest of environments, in spite of the paucity in “resources” whilst others require additional fertilizer and nutrients. The acidity or alkalinity (the ph) of the soil is vital for optimal growth. All need to be tended carefully especially in their tender early years and in their youth. They need to be watered, fed and protected from damaging elements. Our children need as much tender care and attention as the delicate plants named. With enough light, shade and warm sunshine they will turn their heads to the human equivalent of the source of all energy. Our children will turn to the source of love and nurturing, their parents, their teachers and significant role models. The latter provide that enriched environment which ensures an optimum and liberal education.

The education debate on standards has come full circle once again, as it periodically does. New guys on the block don’t know that they are trying to reinvent the wheel for the umpteenth time. “He who does not know history is doomed to repeat it” so the saying goes. We are back to the cries from left field, out in the wings that the three ‘Rs” need more emphasis and that certain unconventional ‘disciplines’ like surfing, need to be curtailed. I find it strange how there are so many who think they’re experts on education because they happened to go to school and have seen the inside of a place of learning. This, they believe, has qualified them in pedagogy and they are convinced that they are experts on how we should be educated.

School teachers are the gardeners of the herbaceous border. They have an enormous potential to influence their charges for good or ill. Many teachers are hero worshipped by their pupils and may be the most significant people in their students’ lives, yes even more so than some parents. Many students choose their future careers based on guidance given by their teachers and they either love or detest a discipline because of the way they have been taught.

From the start, seeds and delicate seedlings need tender loving care from a loving and well trained gardener –teacher. The gardener knows every intricate detail of his plants and gives them what they need for optimal growth and development. They are so

vulnerable that some need to be raised in green houses, special trenches or cucumber frames away from damaging frosts, hail and other inclement weather conditions. But they also need protecting from the scavenging crows and the voracious brush turkeys. Sometimes wild animals, boars, goats, rats and other vermin might strike at young foliage. The young have predators. Even the gardener has to have a blue card to ensure that he is not a “wolf in sheep’s clothing”. Slowly the tiny seedlings, our children, are “hardened” into the local environment. At all times the gardener with his/her horticultural skills, is expert at orchestrating the garden. The teacher is the knowledgeable professional who knows the curriculum and organizes the learning environment. Some of these teachers are outstanding specialists having made in-depth studies of botany, genetics, geology, biology, mathematics and other disciplines. They understand the development of their charges in the minutest detail. They are inspired by the pedagogy of their discipline and they want and need to keep at the cutting edge of scientific research in their chosen career. They in turn pass on their knowledge and enthusiasm by contagion. Their students absorb, sometimes by osmosis, from inspirational mentors.

Is it appropriate for economists, accountants and even lawyers to interfere (yes, the present Minister of Education is a lawyer) and tell the educational experts, the genial and sometimes genius gardeners and botanists, what’s best for the growth and development of their charges?

The lawyers and their ilk, are saying that they want gardens looking the same, being given the same soil, the same weather, the same shade, the same amount of water and sunshine to grow their roots and shoots in unison throughout the land! In their ignorance they think they know what is best for the gardens and the flowers of Australia. Tell the gardeners how to tend the beds of flowers, the herbaceous borders the herb gardens and they might produce a monotonous garden of – rhubarb. Were this to be instigated we would be asking, “Where are the sunflowers?” The big bright strong blossoms might be with us no more. Where are the bluebells?” The delicate pale gregarious blooms have disappeared. We need them all and only an inspirational, enlightened gardener/teacher can extract the creative best from his/ her students.

If resources are available, they need to be put into the gardener/ teachers on an ongoing basis. Their excitement with their work; their enthusiasm and knowledge from regular, high quality professional development, will inspire the nation’s youth. The gardener/ teachers have had enough criticism and put downs. It saps their energy for the job and undermines their former worth. They need to be paid well- for a role in society which is the pinnacle in importance to the nation. It used to be said that “Australia rides on a sheep’s back”. This is no longer true. Australia rides on the gardeners/ teachers’ backs. They nurture our human capital and instil the values of our nation in a sectarian ambience. They meld immigrants of many nations into one of the most successful and satisfying multicultural societies in the world.

Teachers do not need to have more box ticking, paper administration and checking on their charges’ competencies. Human beings, like other creatures, will go through sequential developmental stages automatically whether we like it or not. The boxes don’t

need to be ticked. Teachers on the other hand can draw out the creative instinct which is in all of us and which is often stymied by the periodic rally of “back to the basics” and “emphasize the three Rs or else!”

This brief paper has argued for the freedom to have differing sectarian curricula in different parts of the country and for more trust and resources to be placed in teachers. At the same time I would argue that wealthy private schools should not be supported by the taxpayer’s money as at present. Private schools usually have a comparatively wealthy following of former students or alumni. Any private schools receiving Government, that is, taxpayer funding, need to be answerable to professional organizations such as the Academy of Sciences or University accreditation committees, to ensure the scientific method underpins teaching. This is to avoid a situation resembling that in the UK where according to Dawkins (2006) a wealthy used car dealer put up two million pounds sterling, to establish a school and the Government added twenty million pounds plus ongoing costs in perpetuity. A fundamentalist religious school was established teaching creationism in place of evolution without needing the accreditation or oversight of a reputable Academic committee.